



HM Courts &
Tribunals Service

Vulnerability Action Plan



Background and our approach

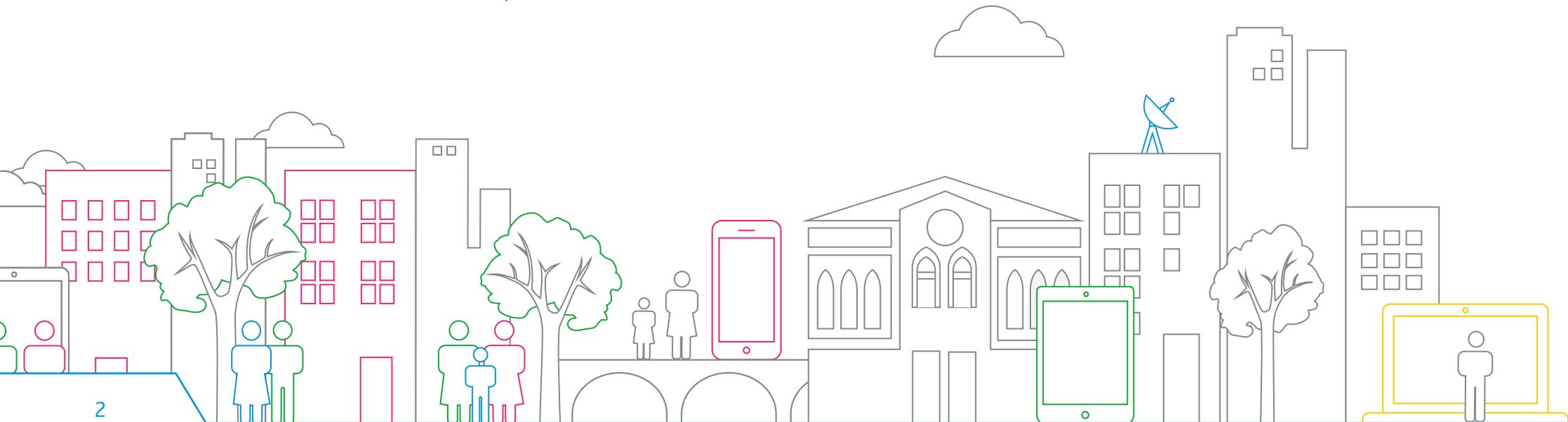
We've changed the way courts and tribunals work so they continue to run safely during COVID-19. During this time it's important that vulnerable people can access the justice system. For us, that means ensuring court and tribunal users can take part and engage with our new ways of working. They should be able to do this without being disadvantaged or discriminated against.

We've focussed on identifying and understanding any impacts for our vulnerable users as a priority and worked to clarify what we need to do to support them. We've put in place processes to understand the actual and potential impacts on our users and created the 'Vulnerability Action Plan' to coordinate work. We've reviewed our approach and put in place help or alternative solutions where possible for our users.

In our HMCTS Recovery Plan we've identified four main priority areas to help support vulnerable users during COVID-19. These are:

- Vulnerable people have the **support** they need to access and participate in court and tribunal services
- Services are **accessible** for vulnerable users during COVID-19
- **Signposting** which meets the needs of vulnerable people
- Collate evidence and **identify COVID-19** impacts on court and tribunal users.

We've used research with our vulnerable users and feedback from staff to add actions to our plan. We've also talked with our Public User Engagement forums and other stakeholders to review our plan.



What we've done so far

Vulnerable people have the support they need to access and participate in court and tribunal services

- Created guidance for staff answering questions on remote hearings by phone (based on frequently asked questions).
- Ensured contracted services could support our service users during remote hearings (such as providing interpreters).
- Ensured intermediaries could work on remote hearings.
- Set up a remote hearings technical support line for professionals and the public.
- Trained enforcement teams to identify and respond to vulnerable people's needs, and sending information about support available with enforcement letters.
- Ministry of Justice has given extra funding to the legal advice third sector in response to COVID-19 related challenges.

Services are accessible for vulnerable users during COVID-19

- Produced a toolkit to help staff assess equality impacts so that we understand potential impacts of changes.
- Produced disabilities guidance for remote hearings to help staff support people with disabilities.
- Published guidance and step by step user instructions on joining remote hearings on GOV.UK.
- Improved information sent to service users about their remote hearing, including about getting support and how to join.
- Ensured GOV.UK information is available in offline channels.
- Reviewed journeys of domestic abuse victims to identify options for improvements and created a plan to make changes.
- In criminal courts we're working with our partners to make sure the needs of vulnerable people are identified at the earliest opportunity, so their needs can be taken into account.

Signposting which meets the needs of vulnerable people

- Reviewed the way we provide information about support options to understand what needs improving.
- Enabled our contact centres to provide details of the 'Support Through Court' phonenumber so that our service users can get additional support for civil and family cases.
- Improved GOV.UK information for domestic abuse victims on getting an injunction and how to get help to apply online.

Collate evidence and identify COVID-19 impacts on court and tribunal users

- Started collecting protected characteristics (equality) data for our service users. In Reform services this is requested as part of a user's application or response and for remote hearings it is in a feedback survey.
- Started to analyse our own data to understand if there were any changes in those using our services because of COVID-19 and lockdown.
- Worked with external organisations including the third sector and academics to understand the impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable users and get early evidence of impacts on our users. This included a survey with our Public User Engagement Group members asking about impacts on court and tribunal users and on the support services they offer.
- The Legal Support team in the Ministry of Justice has carried out work to better understand changing legal advice needs and the demand for advice and support from third sector services.

What actions we are taking



Vulnerable people have the support they need to access and participate in court and tribunal services

- ✓ Adapting our processes to ensure special measures, including access to an intermediary continues to be in place for vulnerable witnesses.
- ✓ Improve access to intermediaries and supporters in remote hearings.
- ✓ Continue to make sure people with disabilities have the reasonable adjustments they need.
- ✓ Co-design a digital support service that works remotely with the centres who will provide the service and implement the change.
- ✓ We're improving information and support for people involved in possession claims, and those facing eviction.



Services are accessible for vulnerable users during COVID-19

- ✓ Where phone and video technology is being used for more and new types of hearings we will make sure it's accessible for vulnerable users.
- ✓ Continuously improve guidance on remote hearings so that those with disabilities and other vulnerable people can access and take part in hearings.
- ✓ Improve online information about court and tribunal venues.
- ✓ Make sure online services meet accessibility standards.



Signposting which meets the needs of vulnerable people

- ✓ Improve our approach to signposting to third party support, so that people can easily find the help and support they need.
- ✓ Improve information about help and support on GOV.UK by identifying priority areas.



Collate evidence and identify COVID-19 impacts on court and tribunal users

- ✓ Carry out research with vulnerable users to understand their needs and inform improvements to our services.
- ✓ Continue to develop our understanding of the impacts of change on our service users. This will help us overcome barriers to justice and make our services more accessible.

Looking to the future

We've made a lot of changes so it's really important we review them to understand what the impacts are on vulnerable users.

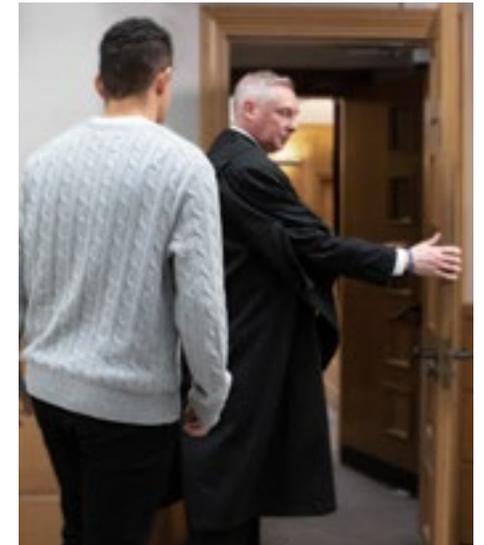
We'll continue to undertake different activities to achieve this, including reviewing the way we've run remote hearings to identify improvements.

We'll keep talking with external stakeholders and partners as part of our review and through our Public User Engagement Groups to get feedback and understand issues.

We're also developing ways to define and measure access to justice. This will help us understand issues in the same way across HMCTS and Ministry of Justice. In the long term it will help us understand the impact of our current [reform work](#) on access to court and tribunal services for vulnerable users.

If we find negative impacts on vulnerable people using our services, we'll take steps to fix them. This work will be included in our Vulnerability Action Plan.

As we do this, we'll work in partnership with staff in the Ministry of Justice and other government departments when needed.





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