

Findings from the Metropolitan Police Pilot and TV Licencing Pilot of the behaviourally-redesigned Single Justice Procedure Notice (SJPN)

Background

The Single Justice Procedure (SJP) applies to cases involving adults charged with summary-only¹ non-imprisonable offences. An adult charged with an SJP offence receives a Single Justice Procedure Notice (SJPN) detailing who has brought the case against them, how to make a plea, and if they can make a plea online. However, the majority of defendants fail to make a plea before the deadline set out in the SJPN. In addition, more defendants choose to submit a postal plea rather than use the online plea services.

To improve engagement rates before the deadline, and to encourage the use of online plea services, HMCTS undertook a review of the SJPN template. Using behavioural insight techniques and stakeholder feedback, a new SJPN template was designed to better meet user needs, encourage defendants to plead, and provide a standardised template designed to be easier to process by prosecutors and HMCTS.

The redesigned notice was piloted with two prosecutors and these two reports outline the findings and recommendations from those pilots.

Pilot and assessment methodology

HMCTS ran pilots with two prosecutors, the Metropolitan Police and TV Licencing in the Midlands region, between December 2019 and February 2020 to monitor and assess the outcomes associated with prosecutors adopting the redesigned notice.

The main aims of the pilot were to assess whether the redesigned notice:

1. Increased defendant engagement
2. Increased digital take-up (online plea rate)
3. Reduced the number of calls with regards to the plea process and paper applications

The assessment, carried out by HMCTS User Experience and Insight, involved:

- Analysis of management information data to measure engagement rates, channel type and plea type
- Analysis of call data from the HMTCS Courts & Tribunals Service Centre² call management system
- Qualitative methods including reviewing a dip sample of returned SJPNs, interviews

¹ Summary offences are minor offences that are almost always tried in a magistrates' court.

² Courts & Tribunals Service Centres are service centres which manage calls and queries from members of the public about their case.

with court staff and observations of SJPN sessions, a focus group with HMCTS CTSC staff and feedback from prosecutors.

Key findings

From the Metropolitan Police pilot:

1. There was a notable increase in online plea submissions (including a slight increase in guilty pleas requesting a hearing).
2. There was no increase in call volumes in London received by the Courts & Tribunals Service Centre during the pilot despite a national increase.
3. A sample of returned forms suggested that there was an improvement in the amount of financial information details provided by defendants during the pilot.
4. There was a decrease in the number of unnecessary documents posted back with the plea form.
5. The redesigned SJPN asked defendants to provide their driving licence number, to ensure the correct driver record was identified, rather than surrender their licence. Most defendants provided their licence number.
6. A substantial proportion of returned plea forms complied with machine reading requirements.

From the TV Licencing Pilot:

1. There was an increase in overall engagement rates from 21% to 27%, which is the highest ever recorded in the Midlands region.
2. The implementation of the redesigned SJPN in the Midlands region caused a shift in the defendants' preferred channel type, from postal to online. Prior to the pilot only a quarter of those who engaged chose to plea online, whereas during the pilot over half of the defendants pleaded online.
3. Prior to the pilot on average 90% of defendants who engaged pleaded guilty whereas after the implementation of the redesigned SJPN the proportion decreased to an average of 85%. The proportion of 'not guilty' pleas has increased from 9% to 15%.
4. The sample included in this report showed that 99% of the financial means form were returned, an increase of 16 percentage points. There was also an improvement in the amount of financial information provided by defendants.
5. A large proportion of returned plea forms complied with machine reading requirements.
6. There was no impact on call volumes to the Courts & Tribunal Service Centre.

Based on the findings presented in the assessment report, it was recommended that the redesigned SJPN template is adopted by other prosecutors.

Next Steps

- In light of the assessment report, HMCTS has agreed to rollout the revised SJP Notice to all prosecutors who use SJP, including Police Forces.

- HMCTS Customer insight & user research team will be conducting a SJPN redesign rollout evaluation as the notice is rolled out with police forces and will report on outcomes and findings and proposals going forward.
- Linked to this, HMCTS will continue to review feedback from user surveys, for example Online Plea and Courts and Tribunals Service Centre Telephone surveys on the revised SJPN to improve engagement further.