



HM Courts &  
Tribunals Service



# Vulnerability Action Plan

## April 2024 update

How we are going to make coming to court  
or a tribunal better for vulnerable people



EasyRead version



HM Courts &  
Tribunals Service

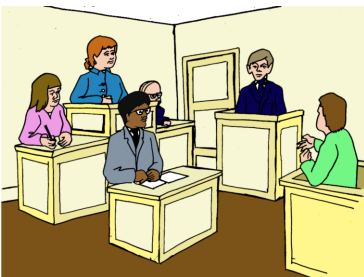
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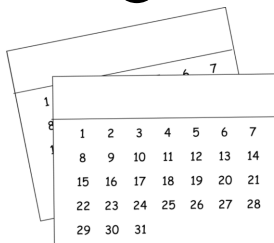
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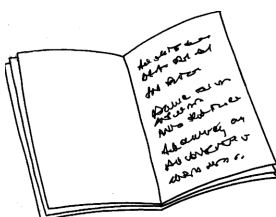
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# About HMCTS

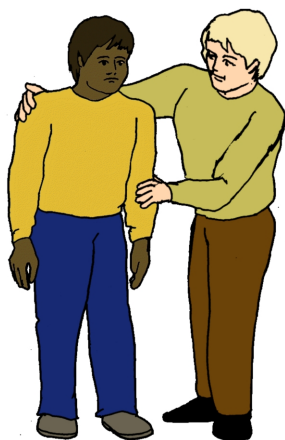


**HMCTS** stands for His Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service.

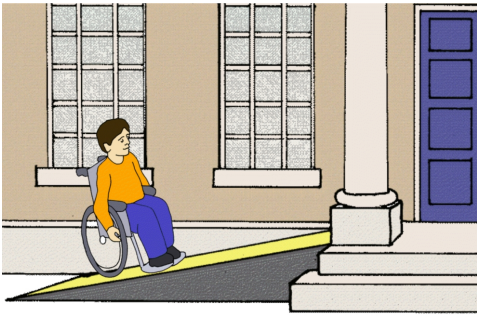
We run courts in England and Wales and tribunals in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland to give people and businesses **access to justice**.



We know that coming to court can feel scary for **vulnerable people**.



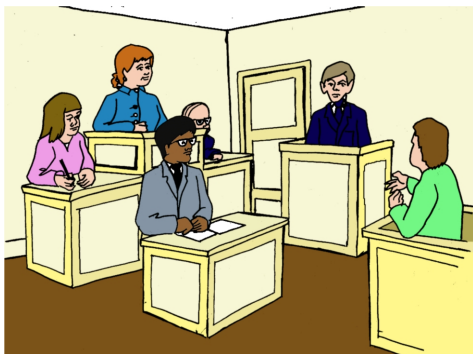
We say people are **vulnerable** when they have a difficulty and need extra support. This could be a disability, mental health condition or an experience which has made someone feel unsafe.



We want our courts and tribunals to be **accessible** and feel safe for **vulnerable** people.



When something is **accessible** everyone can use it.



Our **Vulnerability Action Plan** tells you how we will make coming to courts and tribunals better for **vulnerable** people.



We promise to listen to **vulnerable** people and the services that help **vulnerable** people so we can give you help when you need it.

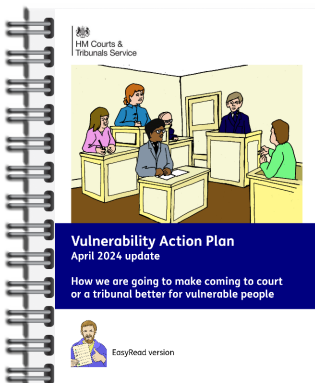


We are working to make our services better to meet your needs.



We work with the Ministry of Justice and other government departments across the **United Kingdom** to make sure we give you the right amount of support.

The **United Kingdom** is made up of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.



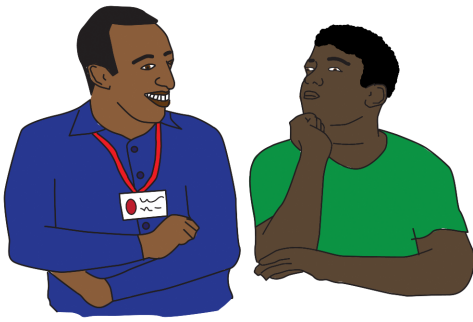
## What this paper is about

We last told you about our plan in October 2023. This is our April 2024 news.



It tells you what we have done since October 2023.

We keep our **Vulnerability Action Plan** up to date by:



- talking with **vulnerable** people and services that help them



- looking at new laws that the government makes to see how they affect **vulnerable** people



- looking at government plans such as the National Disability Strategy



- looking at government plans such as the National Strategy for Autistic Children, Young People, and Adults, and the Ministry of Justice Neurodiversity Action Plan.

# Our priority areas



There are three important things we said we will do. We call them our three **priority areas**.



**Priority 1: giving the right support to vulnerable people using the court and tribunal services.**

This support includes **signposting** or telling them about other places to get information and help.



**Priority 2: collecting information about how using our service affects our vulnerable users.**

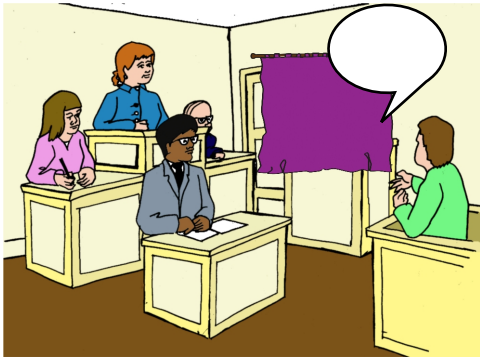
This information is called **evidence**.



**Priority 3: making our services accessible for vulnerable users.**

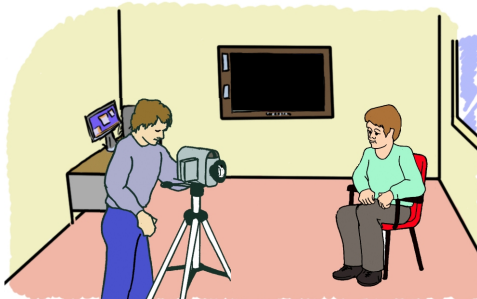
When something is **accessible** everyone can use it.

# How we currently support vulnerable people to access and participate in court and tribunal services

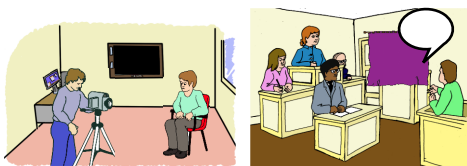


## We offer special measures

**Special measures** are ways we can help **vulnerable** users, such as offering a **remote link** for giving **evidence** or the use of privacy screens in court.



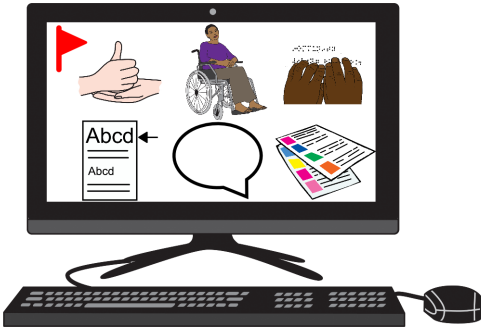
A **remote link** means giving your **evidence** from a safe place away from the courtroom using a video camera.



**Special measures** are not the same everywhere. The type of special measure will depend on the case or hearing.



## We provide reasonable adjustments to make our services accessible to users with disabilities



A **Reasonable adjustment** can be having a person help you with your mobility or communication needs.



For example:

- providing our information in other formats such as audio or easy read



- helping you complete a form



- providing a chair to meet your needs.

## We provide intermediary services if users need communication support at a court or tribunal hearing



**Intermediaries** are communication specialists who work on behalf of **HMCTS** to support people in a court or tribunal hearing.

**Intermediaries** tell **HMCTS** about your communication needs when you are taking part in a court or tribunal hearing.

## We offer remote links and can give you information about video hearings.

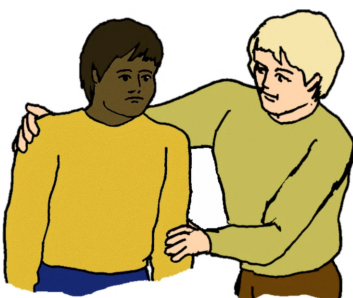


We will:

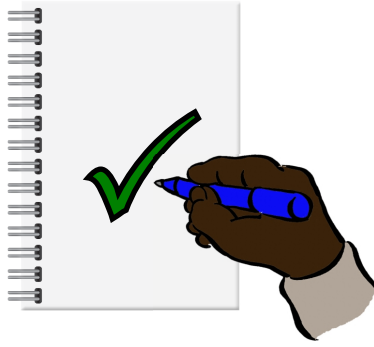
- give you a website link



- tell you how to join the hearing



- let you know how to get support.



## We do equality impact assessments

This means we check how what we do affects you.

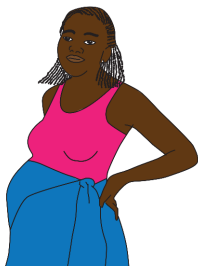


We must treat people equally.



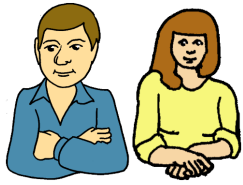
The law says we must not **discriminate** or treat you differently because of:

- age
- gender reassignment
- being married or in a civil partnership
- being pregnant or on maternity leave
- disability
- race





- religion or belief



- sex



- sexual orientation

These are called **protected characteristics**.



**We put information about coming to a court or tribunal on the internet to help you prepare for your visit to a court or tribunal**

You can find this information at [GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk)



**We direct you to additional support that will help you. This is called signposting.**

With the right information, we can work out your needs and connect you with other places and people to get support or help.



## **We have started the Hidden Disabilities Sunflower Scheme in all our courts, tribunals and offices**

People can wear a lanyard with the sunflower symbol to show our staff they may need extra help or a little more time.

# What we have done in our priority areas since October 2023



## Priority 1: giving the right support to vulnerable people using the court and tribunal services.

This support includes **signposting** or telling people where they can get information and help.



- We worked with We Are Group and launched the **Digital Support Service**.

The **Digital Support Services** helps people who can not use the internet or a computer with **online** court and tribunal forms.

**Online** means using the internet.



The **Digital Support Service** now helps people after they apply for:

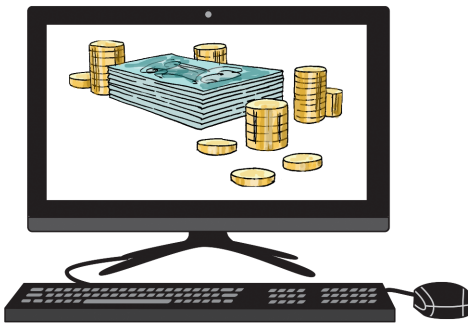
### — divorce

**Divorce** means to officially end a marriage.



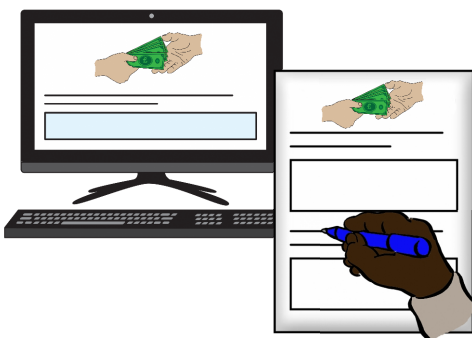
## — the **Single Justice Service**

In the **Single Justice Service** a magistrate can quickly and fairly deal with a minor offence such as using a television without a licence.



## — making a **civil money claim online**

Making a **civil money claim online** means using the internet to ask a court to make a decision on money you think you are owed.



- We launched a **Help with Fees** scheme across government departments.

You can apply on paper or on the internet for help to pay for your court or tribunal fees.



You can ask the **Digital Support Service** if you want to apply but do not have access to the internet or do not feel confident using it.



- We agreed to keep paying Citizens Advice for their work with the Witness Service.



- We started a **webchat** service for people going to the Employment Tribunal in Scotland.

**Webchat** means you talk to someone using **online** messaging.

**Online** means using the internet.



We are looking at how it is going.

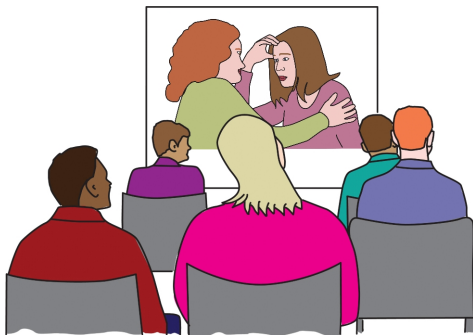




- We agreed all areas will have a **Domestic Abuse champion**.

A **champion** means a person whose job is to check things are working well.

**Domestic abuse** is when your adult family member tries to hurt or control you.



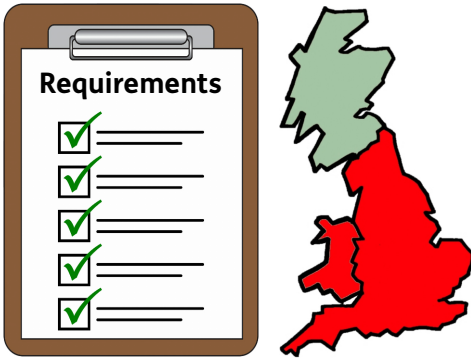
- Staff working in our family courts did training about helping you with **domestic abuse** worries.



- We checked ways of improving family **private law** applications.



**Private law** cases do not involve the local authority.



- In courts in England and Wales we have helped bring in:
  - Community Sentence Treatment Requirements
  - Mental Health Treatment Requirements.



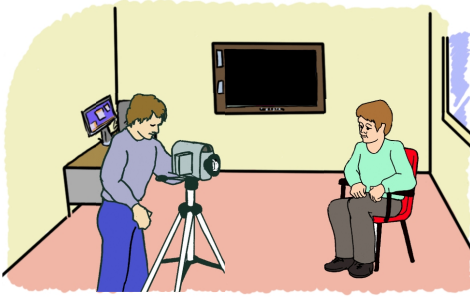
This will make it easier for the courts to think about a person's need for help with drugs, alcohol or their mental health when sentencing them.



- We held some **pre-recorded cross-examinations** in care homes or private home for witnesses who were not able to go to court.



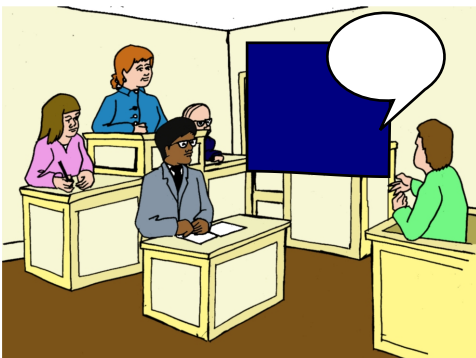
These witnesses may be at the end of their life or too unwell to travel and they need to give their **evidence** as soon as possible.



**Pre-record** means you answer questions outside the courtroom before the hearing and someone makes a video or sound recording to play in court.



**Cross-examination** means a legal representative asks you more questions to check you have been telling the truth.



- We improved **Specialist Sexual Violence Support** courtrooms in 3 courts.

**Specialist Sexual Violence Support** is also called **SSVS**. It is a way to make things easier in court for victims of rape and serious sexual abuse.

The changes will make victims of rape and serious sexual abuse feel more comfortable when giving **evidence**.



## Priority 2: collecting information about how using our service affects our vulnerable users.

This information is called **evidence**.



- We have checked ways **vulnerable** people get **access to justice** when:

- applying for **probate**.

**Probate** means working out what to do with the property and money of someone who has died.



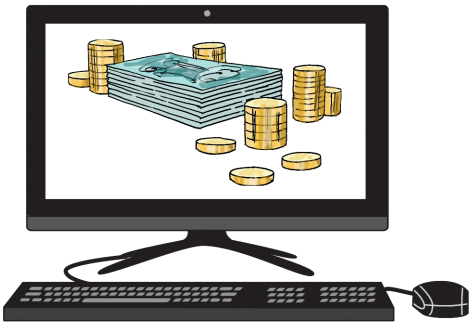
- using **Social Security** and **Child Support** services

**Social security** means government payments to help people who are on a low income or disabled.

**Child support** means parents have to provide money for their child after **divorce** or separation.

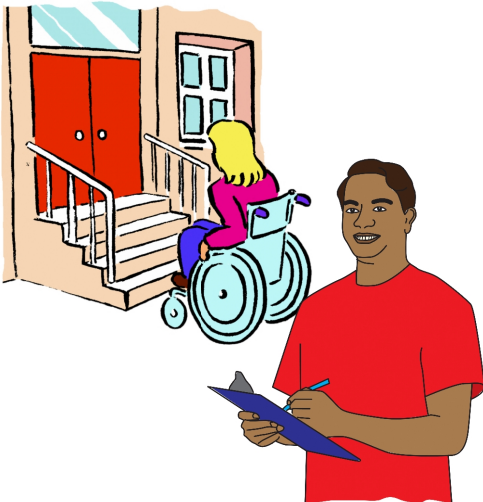


- applying for a **divorce**



- making a **Civil Money Claim online.**

**Online** means using the internet.



- We identified common **barriers** and looked at ways to remove the **barriers.**

**Barriers** are things that can stop people with disabilities from doing things.



- We are still collecting information about users with **protected characteristics** so we can better support their needs.

It is against the law to **discriminate** against anyone because of:



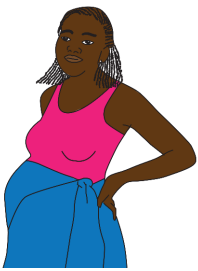
— age



— gender reassignment



— being married or in a civil partnership



— being pregnant or on maternity leave



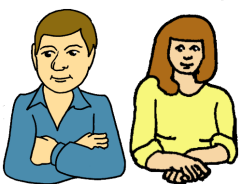
— disability



— race



— religion or belief

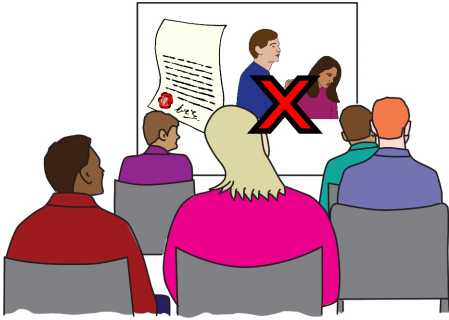


— sex



— sexual orientation.

These are called **protected characteristics**.



- We worked with the prison and probation service to check their staff know about **non-molestation orders**.

A **non-molestation order** protects people from abuse or harassment.

This work will help the prison and probation service keep protected people safe.

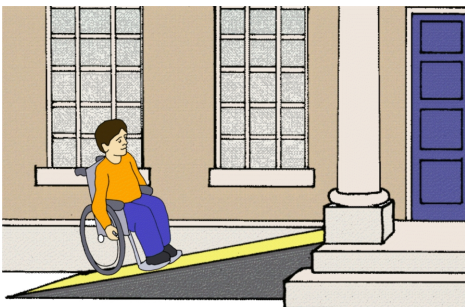


### Priority 3: making our services accessible for vulnerable users.



- We tested the **Video Hearing Service** which is available in 16 courts and tribunals.

**Video hearings** mean people can take part in a hearing across the internet if the judge says it is okay.



- We will spend £220 million on our buildings so they are more **accessible**.



- You can now apply **online** for your final **divorce** order when it is more than 12 months old.



# What we plan to do next



(We have said when we will do things in brackets)

**Priority 1: giving the right support to vulnerable people using the court and tribunal services. This support includes signposting or telling them about other places to get information and help.**

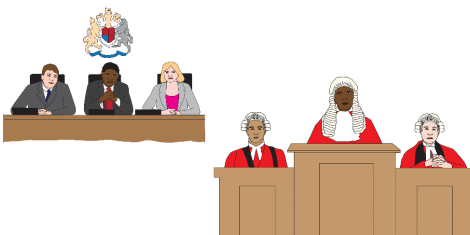


- We will keep the **Digital Support Service** for people who need help **online**.

(Ongoing)



- We will test **cross jurisdictional Domestic Abuse Protection Orders (DAPO)** in Greater Manchester, Croydon and Bromley County courts.

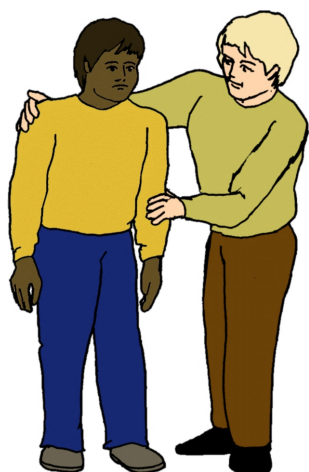


**Cross jurisdictional** means working across the different types of courts such as family, civil and criminal.



**Domestic Abuse Protection Orders** are for victims of all types of **domestic abuse**. The court makes an order to protect the victim of **domestic abuse**.

(Ongoing)



- We will keep working so our **safeguarding** policy protects our users who are **vulnerable** or at risk of harm and neglect.

(Ongoing)

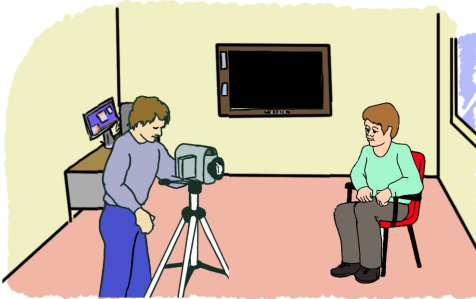


- We will keep working on how we help people who cannot pay the fees to go to a court or a tribunal.

(Ongoing)



- We will try to understand the support people need when they visit court and tribunal buildings and check how we are currently doing.



- We hope to increase the number of sites where people can **pre-record** their **cross examination**.

(Ongoing)



- We will write a report about how our **Video Hearing Service** works and if we need to make more changes to it.

(Ongoing)



- We will keep looking at ways we can improve how family members work through **private law cases**.

**Private law** cases do not involve the local authority.

(Ongoing)



- We will keep working on a counselling service that will help jurors who may be upset after a case dealing with crime.

(Ongoing)



- We will keep working with the National Health Service as it funds new primary care Mental Health Treatment Requirements services across England and Wales.

(Ongoing)



- We will keep helping the Ministry of Justice test the **Specialist Sexual Violence Support** or **SSVS** so staff know how to help people who are dealing with trauma.

We will bring in:

- a training course for all staff at the **Specialist Sexual Violence Support** courts who deal with victims of trauma





**Specialist Sexual Violence Support** is also called **SSVS**. It is a way to make things easier in court for victims of rape and serious sexual abuse.



- Case Coordinators to improve the speed of our work



- an opportunity for adult rape victims to watch sentence hearings **remotely**.

**Remotely** means away from the court room.

(Ongoing)



- We will improve the way we speak with and help victims of sexual offences across the three SSVS courts and Crown courts

(Ongoing)



- We will improve the SSVS court buildings.

(Ongoing)



- We will talk to the Home Office Policy and Innovation Lab (CoLab) who have reviewed **Liaison and Diversion services**.

We will be working with them to bring in their ideas for improvements.



- We will keep working with the Ministry of Justice in developing a new witness service.

(Ongoing)



## Priority 2: collecting information about how using our service affects our vulnerable users.

This information is called **evidence**.



- We are still looking at how **vulnerable** people get **access to justice** across our services. We will finish access to justice assessments for:

- Immigration and Asylum First Tier Tribunal and
- **Single Justice Service.**

**Access to justice** is a person's right to use the courts to work through legal disputes.



We will publish a report about this later in the year.

(Ongoing)



- We will talk to our partner OCS about training Court Security Officers on **domestic abuse** awareness.

(Ongoing)



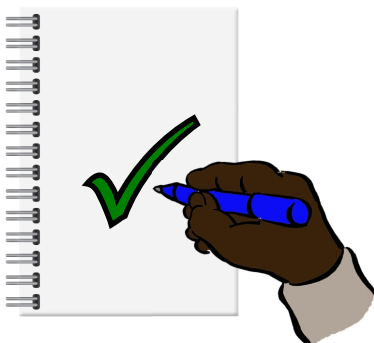
- We will improve how we train Court Ushers to help victims of **domestic abuse**.

(Ongoing)



### **Priority 3: making our services accessible for vulnerable users.**

- We will keep looking for ways to make our buildings more **accessible** for all users with disabilities:



- all new major projects will do **equality impact assessments** to check for **barriers**





- we will check all **HMCTS** buildings to check they are **accessible**



- we will look at information we have about our building



- we started to look at the condition of our buildings in March 2024.

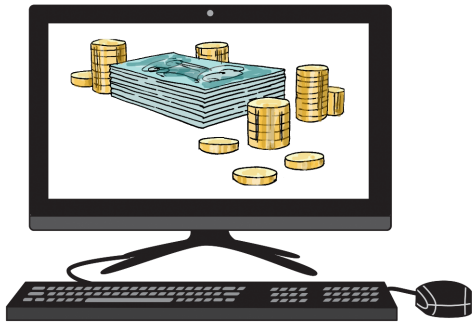
(Ongoing)



- We will improve how we use **case flags**.

**Case flags** tell us if a person needs things such as **reasonable adjustments** for access or Welsh language in civil courts.

(Ongoing)



- We will look at what users have told us about the **automated payment line**.

The **automated payment line** lets you pay for fines **online**.

We will use this information to improve the service.

(Ongoing)



- We will make it easier for you to add information when applying for a **divorce online**.

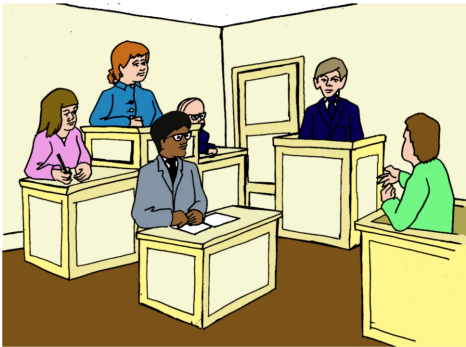
(Autumn 2024)



- We will look at ways to automatically let us know about any requests for **reasonable adjustments**. This will help us look after your needs quickly.

You will be able to tell us about any additional requirements through the employment tribunal **online** user portal.

# Looking to the future



We are making courts and tribunals work better for people who use them and for people working in them. This is called **reform**.



The Ministry of Justice is checking what makes the legal system difficult for **vulnerable** adults. They will look at ways to help **vulnerable** people access justice.



We will keep talking with external stakeholders and partners to get feedback and understand issues.



We will continue to publish our plan on [GOV.UK](http://GOV.UK).

# What the words mean

**Access to justice:** is a person's right to use the courts to work through legal disputes.

**Accessible:** when something is accessible everyone can use it.

**Automated payment line:** lets you pay for fines online or by telephone.

**Barriers:** things that can stop people with disabilities from doing things.

**Case flags:** tell us if a person needs things such as reasonable adjustments for access or Welsh language in civil courts.

**Civil money claim online:** using the internet to ask a court to make a decision on money you think you are owed.

**Cross jurisdictional:** means working across the different types of courts such as family, civil and criminal.

**Cross-examination:** a legal representative asks you more questions to check you have been telling the truth.

**Digital support services:** help to use technology.

**Discriminate:** to treat people differently because of a protected characteristic.

**Divorce:** to officially end a marriage.

**Domestic abuse:** when your adult family member tries to hurt or control you.

**Domestic Abuse champion:** a champion means a person whose job is to check things are working well.

**Domestic Abuse Protection Orders:** are for victims of all types of domestic abuse. The court makes an order to protect the victim of domestic abuse.

**Evidence:** collecting information.

**Equality impact assessments:** check how what we do affects you.

**Help with Fees:** you can apply on paper or on the internet for help to pay for your court or tribunal fees.

**Hidden Disabilities Sunflower Scheme:** tells people that the person wearing the sunflower may need extra help.

**HMCTS:** stands for His Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service. We run courts in England and Wales and tribunals in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland to give people and businesses access to justice.

**Intermediaries:** are communication specialists who work on behalf of HMCTS to support people participating in a court or tribunal hearing. They tell HMCTS about a person's specific communication needs how to help them.

**Liaison and Diversion services:** spots people who have mental disorders, a learning disability, or other vulnerabilities when they first come into the criminal justice system.

**Non-molestation order:** protects you from abuse or harassment.

**Online:** using the internet.

**Pre-record:** you answer questions outside the courtroom before the hearing and someone makes a video or sound recording to play in court.

**Priority areas:** important things we want to do.

**Private law cases:** cases that do not involve the local authority.

**Probate:** is working out what to do with the property and money of someone who has died.

**Protected characteristics:** a law about discriminating against a person because of their age, gender, marital status, being pregnant, disability, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation.

**Reasonable adjustments:** making our service accessible to people with disabilities. This can be having a person help you with your mobility or communication needs.

**Reform:** making courts and tribunals work better for people who use them and for people working in them.

**Remote link:** is giving your evidence from a safe place away from the courtroom using a video camera.

**Safeguarding:** is protecting vulnerable people.

**Specialist Sexual Violence Support or SSVS:** will make things easier in court for victims of rape and serious sexual abuse.

**Signposting:** telling people about other places to get information and help.

**Single Justice Service:** where a magistrate can quickly and fairly deal with a minor offence such as using a television without a licence.

**Social security and child support:** are run by the government.

**Social security:** means government payments to help people who are on a low income or disabled.

**Child support:** means parents have to provide money for their child after divorce or separation.

**Special measures:** are ways we can help vulnerable users, such as offering a remote link to give evidence and the use of privacy screens in court.

**United Kingdom** is made up of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

**Video hearings:** mean people can take part in a hearing across the internet if the court says it is okay.

**Vulnerable:** when people have a difficulty and need extra support. This could be a disability, mental health condition or an experience which has made someone feel unsafe.

**Vulnerability Action Plan:** how we are going to make coming to court better for vulnerable people.

**Webchat:** you talk to someone using online messaging.

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