

Online Procedure Rule Committee

Minutes of meeting on 19 January 2026

Conducted in a hybrid format at The Royal Courts of Justice, Fetter Lane, London and via video conference.

Members in attendance

- Sir Geoffrey Vos, Master of the Rolls (MR)
- Sir Andrew McFarlane, President of the Family Division (PFD)
- Sir James Dingemans (SPT)
- Sarah Stephens (SS)
- Brett Dixon (BD)
- Gerard Boyers (GB)

Non-members in attendance

- Lord Justice Baker
- Mrs Justice Joanna Smith
- Lady Justice Cockerill
- Lord Justice Dove
- Sarah Rose, MoJ
- Harriet Ainsworth-Smith, MoJ
- Helen Timpson, MoJ
- Graeme Wood, MoJ
- Fola Shodeinde, OPRC Secretariat team
- Grace Hodgess, MoJ
- Vijay Parkash, Secretariat to the TPC
- Elena Birchall, MoJ
- Jennifer Tugman, MoJ
- Amrita Dhaliwal, MoJ
- Marcia Williams, MoJ
- Christopher Halkou, MoJ
- Crystal Hung, MR's Legal Advisor
- Rachel Tocknell, PS to MR
- Nick Lee, JO
- Joshua Gibson, JO
- Thomas Atfield, MR's DPS
- Heidi Bancroft, SPT's Private Office
- Bee Ezete, Private Secretary to the PFD
- Antonia Shakesby, JO
- Tessa Lieven Wright, JO
- Steven Chapman HMCTS
- Alasdair Wallace, Drafting Lawyer
- Rosemary Rand, HMCTS
- Amar, Morjaria HMCTS
- Emma Petty, HMCTS

Item 1 - Welcome, Apologies and Introductory Remarks

1. **Apologies:** The Chancellor of the High Court.
2. **Minutes:** the minutes from last meeting on 17 November 2025 were approved.

Item 2 – Expansion of OPRC rulemaking powers

3. HT updated the Committee that the Minister of State for Courts and Tribunals had given approval for work to begin on an Affirmative Statutory Instrument (SI) to expand the Online Procedure Rule Committee's powers to include money claims, damages claims and employment tribunals.
4. The Committee would see a draft of this SI in their February meeting. Under the current timetable it was expected that the SI would come into force in August 2026, although this would be dependent on the parliamentary process.
5. The Committee acknowledged the significance of these changes and discussed the need to begin preparations for transitioning rules across the areas affected.
6. It was agreed that the SI should refer to 'employment cases' rather than 'employment tribunal cases'.
7. The Committee discussed the status of its activity in relation to financial remedies rules, noting its current pause, while the Committee had been focussed on progressing activity in other areas. It was agreed that Lord Justice Baker would undertake an initial scoping exercise and report back to the committee.

Item 3 – Online Procedure Rules

8. HT reported that the public consultation on the draft *Online Procedure (Core Rules and Practice Directions) 2026*, closed on 16 January with 23 responses received. It was noted that the feedback was broadly constructive and the majority would be addressed in the next stages of the drafting process.
9. Several themes emerged which had been outlined for the Committee in an additional paper shared earlier that day. Key themes included the framing of powers and duties in the rules, questions around whether the current drafting included policy statements and whether this was appropriate for procedural rules, and technical points on definitions and drafting.
10. Members discussed publication of consultation responses. It was noted that previous consultations have typically been followed by publication of a summary rather than full responses, and the Committee agreed that future consultations should make clear whether and how responses might be published.
11. It was agreed that the secretariat would return in February with a proposed summary of responses for publication on the OPRC webpage, and that drafting changes to the rules would be progressed out of Committee with an updated draft to be circulated ahead of the February meeting.

Item 4 - Fulfilment of OPRC Requirements

12. RR (HMCTS) provided an update on HMCTS plans to meet the eleven requirements articulated by the OPRC and agreed by HMCTS in November 2024, and invited questions and steers from the Committee, with specific discussion on requirements 9 and 10.
13. With regards to Requirement 9, members emphasised the importance of developing a coherent user journey for closely related property disputes. HMCTS confirmed that possession and property tribunal services were being developed

on the same underlying CFT digital architecture, and that the technology can be adapted to reflect rules and jurisdictional changes as required.

14. Members welcomed confirmation that funding had been secured to digitalise the property tribunal jurisdiction and requested further details about the scope of the digitalisation exercise. They agreed that the OPRC intended to exercise its rule-making powers so that property tribunal claims could be digitalised in an integrated way with the possession service, consistent with the requirements set.

Item 5 – Sub-Committee Workstream Updates

15. The Committee welcomed the appointment of Mrs Justice Joanna Smith as the new chair of the Core Group and Sub-Committee moving forward and thanked the outgoing chair, Lord Justice Colin Birss (The Chancellor of the High Court) for his leadership of the Sub-Committee to date.
16. The Committee noted that the core group and related subgroups (including inclusion, communications, and technology) would be meeting in the coming days. Members noted that the pre-action model remained a key area of work and would return to focus once the foundational work across the workstreams was complete.
Membership of the money claims, damages and employment working group was discussed and steps would be taken to establish that group.

Item 6 – Sub-Committee Governance

17. GW (Secretariat) presented proposals to amend the governance structure for working groups removing the Steering Group and expanding the remit of the Core Group so that it can provide leadership and direction to rule-making workstreams as required.
18. The Committee noted that the Core Group had considered and approved the proposal in December. The Committee approved the revised governance approach and the amendment of terms of reference to reflect this.

Item 7 – Private Family Law Digital Project

19. GH (MoJ) provided an update on the private family law digital transformation work, including improvements to GOV.UK content to encourage safe and appropriate non-court dispute resolution.
20. The Committee heard about the early indicators of impact, including increased click-throughs to the “find a mediator” service and increased applications to the family mediation voucher scheme.
21. GH explained the team had developed a Child Arrangement Planner which helps separating families agree practical arrangements for their children on GOV.UK. It creates a framework for parents to come to an agreement and prompts them to consider and plan the key aspects of children's lives. GH added that it would be entering public beta in early 2026 (meaning it would be available for public use and would undergo wither refinement based on feedback). GH confirmed further features in development (including save-and-return and options for multiple children) to follow from that.

22. The Committee noted that previous work on an AI chatbot had been handed to the Justice AI Unit, who were preparing advice for ministers on options for the next stage, including potential integration with broader GOV.UK developments.
23. Members welcomed the work and recorded strong support and endorsement across the workstreams. Members requested a further update (including metrics and user insights) at a future OPRC meeting.

AOB

24. None

Actions

- Secretariat to publish the approved November minutes.
- Secretariat to bring the draft of the SI to expand the OPRC remit to the February meeting and keep members updated on the timetable.
- Brett Dixon and secretariat to progress establishment of the money claims and damages claims working group (including terms of reference and membership), engaging the Tribunal Procedure Committee as appropriate, and report back to the Committee.
- Lord Justice Baker to undertake initial scoping on financial remedies, including engagement with relevant lead judges, and report back to a future meeting.
- Alasdair Wallace (with the secretariat) to produce tracked and clean drafts of the core rules reflecting consultation feedback for the February meeting.
- Secretariat to provide proposed summary of consultation responses for publication for the February meeting.
- HMCTS and MoJ policy to discuss Requirement 9 and bring an update to the next meeting.
- HMCTS to return with further detail on the digital/paper forms approach, including sharing demonstrations or screenshots as appropriate.
- HMCTS to continue development of an end-to-end clickable prototype and provide an update on feasibility and timelines, including plans for ongoing maintenance.
- MoJ to share metrics and key learning from the private family workstreams with the Committee, following the launch of the Child Arrangement Planner.